

## Reading Group Guide

## Spotlight on: *The Historian*

### **Author:** Elizabeth Kostova

Born c. 1965; married; husband's name Georgi (a computer scientist). Education: Yale University, degree; University of Michigan, M.F.A., 2004. Addresses: Agent: c/o Author Mail, Little, Brown and Company, 1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

**Name:** Elizabeth Kostova

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**Education:** Yale University, degree; University of Michigan, M.F.A., 2004.

**Addresses:** Agent: c/o Author Mail, Little, Brown and Company, 1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.



### **Career:**

Has worked recording folk music in Bulgaria, mowing lawns, as a business writing teacher, and as a freelance magazine writer.

### **Awards:**

Hopwood Award for novel-in-progress, for *The Historian*.

### **Writings:**

*The Historian* (novel), Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2005.

*The Historian* has been translated into twenty-eight languages.

### **Works in Progress:**

A second novel.

### **Media Adaptations:**

*The Historian* was optioned for film by Sony Pictures and has been adopted for audiocassette.



## Author: Elizabeth Kostova (2)

### Sidelights:

The idea at the center of Elizabeth Kostova's lengthy debut novel, *The Historian*, is that the legendary, dreaded Count Dracula still walks among mortals. The Dracula of Kostova's world, however, does not resemble the urbane but deadly charmer characterized by Bela Lugosi in film, nor does he share the wanton violence and feral characteristics of more recent vampires. Instead, Kostova's Dracula is himself an historian: He is an archivist, a dusty academic, a scholar more at home with crumbling books and historical documents than waiflike victims and flapping bats. *The Historian* "is a tale of such fiendish complication that while writing it, Kostova kept a chart on her wall tracing the narratives," noted Malcolm Jones in *Newsweek*. "But it is a testament to her skill that, as you're reading, the book never feels complicated," Jones added. This Dracula has nothing to do with the version put forth by Stoker; Kostova's character is based on Vlad Tepes, also known as Vlad the Impaler, the sadistic prince of Wallachia who refined slow torture to its pinnacle using the blunt point of a stake in the ground.

The novel and its labyrinthine plot, occult conspiracies, and international academic mysteries have garnered comparisons to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, but Kostova started the novel eight years before Brown's book was published. The idea for *The Historian* occurred to Kostova more than a decade ago, while she was hiking through the Appalachian mountains with her husband. What if a father was telling stories about Dracula to his daughter, she thought, and what if Dracula himself was there to listen in on them?

The story begins when the novel's unnamed narrator, who is sixteen years old in 1972, finds an unusual book and a mysterious packet of letters in her father Paul's library in Amsterdam. The book is blank, except for an ominous center spread depicting a dragon holding a banner emblazoned with the word "Drakulya." The letters, alarming in themselves, are dated 1930 and addressed to "My dear and unfortunate successor." Initially hesitant to provide any information, Paul eventually relates a complicated tale of encounters with ancient evil. The book, Paul tells his daughter, mysteriously appeared on his desk when he was a graduate student and inspired him to undertake some research on the historical Dracula—a word that, in Romanian, means "Dragon." When Paul mentions the book to his professor, Bartholomew Rossi, he learns that Rossi also received a copy of the unusual tome. Rossi's research, however, convinced him that the historical Dracula was still alive. A few days later, Rossi disappeared from his blood-spattered office, and despite the unreality of the situation, Paul was convinced that his mentor was in the hands of Dracula and in deadly danger. Searching for the man, Paul encountered Helen Rossi, who said she was the professor's unknown daughter, but who bore the first name of the narrator's mother. Helen joined Paul on his unsuccessful search. A few days after telling his daughter this story, Paul also disappears, allegedly called away on business, but leaving a note imploring his daughter to start carrying garlic in her pockets and wearing a crucifix.

Kostova weaves together a sophisticated interconnected storyline that spans the 1930s, 1950s, and 1970s, as the narrator searches for her father, Paul searches for Rossi, and Rossi makes his own investigation into relationships between the mysterious book, its recipients, and the uncanny truth about Tepes. Some reviewers have been critical of the novel's slow pace. "The characters wander from dusty old archive to archive, their pockets stuffed full of garlic, perusing crumbling volumes, analyzing creepy Balkan folk songs, and debriefing sage Eastern European elders who hoard ancestral secrets," commented Jennifer Reese in *Entertainment Weekly*. "Eventually, even the most patient reader may begin to tire of all this talking and touring."

Numerous other critics, however, found considerably more to like about Kostova's novel. "The writing is excellent, and the pace is brisk, although it sags a bit in the middle," noted Patricia Altner in *Library Journal*. "Blending history and myth, Kostova has fashioned a version so fresh that when a stake is finally driven through a heart, it inspires the tragic shock of something happening for the very first time," Jones remarked. Salon.com reviewer Laura Miller commented on the book's settings and atmosphere, stating that "Kostova has a genius for evoking places without making you wade through paragraphs of description."



**Author:** Elizabeth Kostova (3)

**Sidelights: (Continued)**

Kostova has “done something quite extraordinary,” concluded June Sawyers in a review for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. “She has refashioned the vampire myth into a compelling contemporary novel, a late-night page-turner that will be sure to make you lose some precious hours of sleep. It is a sprawling piece of work, the kind of novel that supposedly doesn’t get published anymore.”



**Author:** Elizabeth Kostova (4)

**Further Reading:**

**Periodicals:**

*Bookseller*, July 16, 2004, review of *The Historian*, p. 29.

*Denver Post*, June 12, 2005, Brian Richard Boylan, "A Thrill Ride through History," review of *The Historian*.

*Entertainment Weekly*, May 27, 2005, Karen Valby, "Creature Feature: Elizabeth Kostova Kicks off a Season of Must-Reads with Her Chilling New Dracula Thriller *The Historian*," p. 103; June 24, 2005, Jennifer Reese, "Neck at Night: Is Elizabeth Kostova's Vampire Thriller, *The Historian* a Book You Can Sink Your Teeth Into?," p. 166.  
*Guardian* (London, England), July 18, 2005, Gary Younge, "Bigger than Dan Brown," profile of Elizabeth Kostova.  
*Houston Chronicle*, July 15, 2005, Michael D. Clark, "Creepy Secrets: Inventive, Best-Selling Page-Turner Lives up to the Hype," review of *The Historian*.

*Library Journal*, June 15, 2005, Patricia Altner, review of *The Historian*, p. 58.

*Miami Herald*, June 26, 2005, Connie Ogle, "Stake Out: With Scholarly Intrigue and Globetrotting Adventure, Intriguing Novel Delves Deep into the Myth of Dracula," review of *The Historian*.

*Newsweek*, June 13, 2005, Malcolm Jones, "A High-Stakes Debut, Elizabeth Kostova's Dracula Novel Drew an Unheard-of \$2 Million Advance. Now for the Twist: It Was Worth It," review of *The Historian*, p. 74.

*New York Daily News*, June 12, 2005, Sherryl Connelly, "Vlad Chic: Sprawling Vampire History-Mystery Set to Spike *Da Vinci Code* Sales," review of *The Historian*.

*New York Times*, June 13, 2005, Janet Maslin, "Scholarship Trumps the Stake in Pursuit of Dracula," review of *The Historian*.

*People*, July 4, 2005, Jonathan Durbin, review of *The Historian*, p. 44.

*Publishers Weekly*, April 11, 2005, review of *The Historian*, p. 31; April 11, 2005, Anne Sanow, "Vivifying the Undead," interview with Elizabeth Kostova.

*San Francisco Chronicle*, June 12, 2005, June Sawyers, "Dracula Dead? Not Exactly ...," review of *The Historian*.

*San Jose Mercury News*, June 19, 2005, Charles Matthews, "Putting the Bite On," review of *The Historian*.

*Seattle Times*, July 15, 2005, Deloris Tarzan Ament, "*The Historian*; Elegant Vampire Story Gets in Your Blood."

*Time*, June 20, 2005, Lev Grossman, review of *The Historian*, p. 70.

*Times* (London, England), July 16, 2005, Saffron Burrows, "The Tooth Is Out There."



**Author:** Elizabeth Kostova (5)

**Further Reading:**

**Online:**

CollectedMiscellany.com, <http://www.collectedmiscellany.com/> (July 8, 2005), review of *The Historian*.

January Online, <http://www.januarymagazine.com/> (August 19, 2005), Tony Buschbaum, "Sucker Punch," review of *The Historian*.

Salon.com, <http://www.salon.com/> (June 6, 2005), Laura Miller, review of *The Historian*.

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2006.





## Reading Group Guide

## Spotlight on: *The Historian*

### About This Book:

"To you, perceptive reader, I bequeath my history...."

Late one night, exploring her father's library, a young woman finds an ancient book and a cache of yellowing letters. The letters are all addressed to "My dear and unfortunate successor," and they plunge her into a world she never dreamed of—a labyrinth where the secrets of her father's past and her mother's mysterious fate connect to an inconceivable evil hidden in the depths of history.

The letters provide links to one of the darkest powers that humanity has ever known—and to a centuries-long quest to find the source of that darkness and wipe it out. It is a quest for the truth about Vlad the Impaler, the medieval ruler whose barbarous reign formed the basis of the legend of Dracula. Generations of historians have risked their reputations, their sanity, and even their lives to learn the truth about Vlad the Impaler and Dracula. Now one young woman must decide whether to take up this quest herself—to follow her father in a hunt that nearly brought him to ruin years ago, when he was a vibrant young scholar and her mother was still alive.

What does the legend of Vlad the Impaler have to do with the modern world? Is it possible that the Dracula of myth truly existed—and that he has lived on, century after century, pursuing his own unknowable ends? The answers to these questions cross time and borders, as first the father and then the daughter search for clues, from dusty Ivy League libraries to Istanbul, Budapest, and the depths of Eastern Europe. In city after city, in monasteries and archives, in letters and in secret conversations, the horrible truth emerges about Vlad the Impaler's dark reign—and about a time-defying pact that may have kept his awful work alive down through the ages.

Parsing obscure signs and hidden texts, reading codes worked into the fabric of medieval monastic traditions—and evading the unknown adversaries who will go to any lengths to conceal and protect Vlad's ancient powers—one woman comes ever closer to the secret of her own past and a confrontation with the very definition of evil. Elizabeth Kostova's debut novel is an adventure of monumental proportions, a relentless tale that blends fact and fantasy, history and the present, with an assurance that is almost unbearably suspenseful—and utterly unforgettable.

### Discussion Questions:

Reading Guide from: [Readinggroupguides.com](http://Readinggroupguides.com)

1. In the "Note to the Reader," the narrator tells us, "There is a final resource to which I have resorted when necessary—the imagination." How does she use this resource in telling her story? Is it a resource to which the other historians in the book resort, as well?
2. The theme of mentors and disciples is an important one in the book. Who are the story's mentors, and in what sense is each a mentor? Who are the book's disciples?
3. Near the end of Chapter 4, Rossi says, "Human history's full of evil deeds, and maybe we ought to think of them with tears, not fascination." Does he follow his own advice? How does his attitude toward history evolve in the course of his own story?



## Book: The Historian (2)

### Discussion Questions (Continued):

4. In Chapter 5, Paul's friend Massimo asserts that in history, there are no small questions. What does he mean by this and how does this idea inform the book? Do you agree with his statement?
5. Helen and Paul come from very different worlds, although they share a passion for history. How have their upbringings differed? What factors have shaped each?
6. Throughout the book, anyone who finds an antique book with a dragon in the middle is exposed to some kind of danger. What does this danger consist of? Is it an external power, or do the characters bring it upon themselves?
7. Each of the characters is aware of some of the history being made in his or her own times. What are some of these real historical events, and why are they important to the story?
8. At the beginning of Chapter 1, Paul's daughter notes, "I had been raised in a world so sheltered that it makes my adult life in academia look positively adventurous." How does she change as a person in the course of her quest?
9. Helen's history is deeply intertwined with that of Dracula. In what ways are the two characters connected? Does she triumph over his legacy, or not?
10. In Chapter 73, Dracula states his credo: "History has taught us that the nature of man is evil, sublimely so." Do the characters and events of the novel prove or disprove this belief?



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### Reviews:

"*The Historian* is a marvelous book that draws the reader into an infectious vortex of mystery and discovery. It is beautifully written and full of real and believable characters, but what most impresses me is the way Elizabeth Kostova has taken an old and worn genre and made it entirely fresh and undeniably her own. This is great fiction." David Liss, author of *A Conspiracy of Paper* and *A Spectacle of Corruption*

"A thoroughly impressive and entertaining debut, epic in its scope, deeply human in its concerns" George Saunders, author of *Civilwarland in Bad Decline* and *Pastoralia*.

"*The Historian* is the first Dracula novel to focus on the bloodlines of Vlad Dracula's descendants--not just the bloody trail the vampire left behind. Elizabeth Kostova's stunning debut gives us a multi-layered insider's look at 500 years of eastern European history." Katherine Neville, author of *The Eight*

"Exotic locales, tantalizing history, a family legacy and a love of the bloodthirsty: it's hard to imagine that readers won't be bitten, too." *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"Anne Rice, beware. There's a new Queen of the night in town, and she's taking no prisoners." *Kirkus* (starred review)

"Kostova may have outdone Stoker or even, for that matter, Hollywood.... Before the sun sets, grab this book and take a long and satisfying drink." *USA Today*

"Stuffed with rich, incense-laden history cultural history and travelogue...a smart, bibliophilic mystery." *TIME Magazine*

"Blending history and myth, Kostova has fashioned a version of [the Dracula story] so fresh that when a stake is finally driven through the heart, it inspires the tragic shock of something happening for the very first time." *Newsweek*

"The season's must-read novel...think THE DA VINCI CODE with brains... bloody good!" *Rolling Stone*

"Artfully constructed and atmospheric..." *Washington Post Book World*

"For the sophisticated reader it's a fine Bordeaux to Dan Brown's overcaffeinated Diet Coke." *Salon.com*

"Kostova's thorough research and lively narrative will compel many in search of a good story, richly told and not soon forgotten." *Chicago Tribune*

"A natural storyteller [Kostova provides]... much to savor in this intricately plotted, delicately written novel." *San Francisco Chronicle*

"A masterly bouillabaisse of scholarship, history, anthropology, folklore and superstition...a blockbuster... impossible to put down." *Denver Post*

"A tale that deserves to be savored." *New York Daily News*





## Reading Group Guide

## Spotlight on: *The Historian*

### Reviews: (Continued)

"Kostova has a keen sense of storytelling and she has a marvelous tale to tell. One terrific and fascinating read..."  
*Baltimore Sun*

"Exceptionally well-written, with a particularly fine eye for descriptive detail... all the ingredients to catapult her into the public eye and *Da Vinci Code*-like sales success...." *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram*



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### Reading Guide From BookBrowse.com

Caution! It is likely that the following reading guide will reveal, or at least allude to, key plot details. Therefore, if you haven't yet read this book, but are planning on doing so, you may wish to proceed with caution to avoid spoiling your later enjoyment.

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